

Col. Allensworth State Historic Park
Historical Background

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COLONEL ALLENSWORTH

The life of Col. Allensworth, and the founding of the town named for him, reflect the ongoing struggle for self-determination of American Blacks.

Allensworth was born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1842. His parents were house slaves for the A. P. Starbirds, who sent Allensworth to work for another family when they discovered that the boy, contrary to slave law, had learned to read and write. He attempted to escape when he was 13, and was sold on the slave market. He was finally able to join the Union forces in Louisville in 1862, working as a civilian nurse with the hospital corps of the 44th Illinois Infantry (Alexander 1914:7, 133-139, 172-177). He enlisted in the Navy in April 1863, and served as a seaman for two years, being discharged in 1865, a few days before the end of the Civil War (Letter, Charles Darling, Acting Secretary of the Navy, to the Secretary of War, June 27, 1904).

Within a few years, Allensworth was established as a Baptist minister, was furthering his education, and had become active in Republican politics. He was ordained in 1871, with his first pastorate at Franklin, Kentucky. He began his formal education in 1868 at the Ely Normal School for Freedmen in Louisville, completed both secular and Biblical study courses at the Nashville Institute in 1875, and was certified as a teacher for the Bowling Green, Kentucky School System in 1883. He had become sufficiently known in politics to be chosen as a delegate from Kentucky to the National Republican Conventions in 1880 and 1884 (Alexander 1914:190-194, 231, 236).

Allensworth had learned that the chaplain of the all-Black 24th Infantry was to retire in 1886, and by late 1884 he began actively seeking support to obtain the position. His request to President Cleveland, April 1, 1885, pointed out that there was "one colored man chaplain in the service," and that the appointment would "be assisting the administration to show that where there is deserving merit and ability, among the colored race, all things being equal, it will be recognized." Allensworth's appointment was recommended and endorsed by political leaders, including Senator Blackburn of Kentucky, educators, and ministers. One endorsement, ironic in our time, came from Mrs. A. P. Starbird, noted as "his former owner."

In 1885, Allensworth moved with his family to Cincinnati, where he was pastor of the Union Baptist Church. He had married Josephine Leavell in 1877; their daughters Eva and Nella were born in Bowling Green.

In Ohio, Allensworth continued to work toward obtaining the chaplaincy. In his letter to Senator Joseph E. Brown, of Georgia, in March 1886, he indicated that the position was now vacant, and asked that Brown use his influence with the President to secure the appointment. Despite his accomplishments and their recognition by his contemporaries, Allensworth commented to Brown that he was "on pleasant terms with the Whites of my State...and that in all my relations with them, I have never given them occasion to complain of any attempt of mine to intrude upon their social convictions or usages."

Allensworth was appointed chaplain, with the rank of captain, to the 24th Infantry in April 1886. He served with distinction, his contributions including the establishment of post schools and courses of study for soldiers

and their families. In June 1904, he was advanced to the rank of major; he retired in 1906 as a lieutenant-colonel, the highest rank given to a Black officer in the Army at that time.

After retirement, Col. Allensworth traveled through the East and Midwest, lecturing on the necessity of Black self-help programs. In 1908, he and his family moved to the Los Angeles area. Here he met William Payne, who was educated as a teacher and had taught for five years in Ohio and West Virginia, before coming to Los Angeles in 1906 (Ramsey 1978:25-26).

Both Allensworth and Payne had worked for the advancement of Blacks through education and believed strongly in self-help programs. Together they decided to establish a self-sustaining, self-governing Black community. In June 1908, along with Harry Mitchell, W. H. Peck, and J. W. Palmer, Allensworth and Payne incorporated to form the California Colony and Home Promoting Association (Ramsey 1978:16, 26; Los Angeles County Land Records 1908). The colony was to provide a base for "...industrious enterprising Negroes, who wish to develop their individuality to its highest efficiency, who are contending for industrial and intellectual liberty, not for themselves alone, but for all members of the Race, wherever they may be" (The Sentiment Maker, May 15, 1912:1).

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Black Migration

Making a new home in the West in the early part of this century, the Allensworth and Payne families joined an accelerating movement of Black citizens seeking a better life. Massive migration from the South to the North and West had begun in the 1870s. It was evident not only that Reconstruction was a failure, but that, with the removal of federal controls in the southern states, worse times were to come. Approximately 68,000 Blacks left the South between 1870 and 1880 (Glaab and Brown 1976:124).

Movement west was facilitated by federal land opened for homesteading and by railway right-of-way tracts offered at low prices. The availability of land, increasing racial oppression in the South, and the efforts of dedicated Black leaders gave impetus to the migration to Kansas of the 1870s. During the Great Exodus, in spring of 1879, an estimated 6,000 Blacks crossed into Kansas (Painter 1977:184).

Benjamin Singleton, who had escaped from slavery as a young man, worked zealously to persuade Blacks to leave Tennessee for Kansas, and to obtain land for them there. Called the father of the migration to Kansas (Painter 1977: 109, 117), Singleton testified at a Senate hearing on the exodus:

...my people, for the want of land--we needed land for our children--and their disadvantages--that caused my heart to grieve and sorrow, pity for my race, sir, that was coming down, instead of going up--that caused me to go to work for them (Singleton 1880:380).

A second large migration of Blacks to the West took place with the opening of government lands in the Oklahoma-Indian Territories in 1889. Settlement in the territories was promoted by Black leaders, who hoped to establish a political majority and eventually a predominantly Black state. Edward P. McCabe, the best-known leader, served as the state auditor of Kansas from 1882 to 1887, and sought the governorship of the Oklahoma Territory. Thousands of Blacks took part in the runs to file claims on Indian lands, and migration to the territory continued into this century. Ironically, the establishment of statehood in 1907 began the disenfranchisement of Oklahoma's Black citizens (cf. Bittle and Geis 1957:256-258). Between 1890 and 1910, however, the Black population of Oklahoma had increased from 21,609 to 137,612 (Littlefield and Underhill 1973:342-357; Knight 1977:68, 70, 72).

The exodus from the South continued, increasing steadily, as Blacks migrated to find opportunities to make a living and for freedom from "the deluge of segregation statutes" which followed the 1896 Supreme Court decision upholding separate railway facilities (Degler 1959:234-235). Between 1900 and 1910, approximately 194,000 Blacks left the South. In the next decade, the number of migrants avalanched, with the failure of the South's cotton crop in 1915 and 1916, and the demand for industrial labor during World War I (Glaab and Brown 1976:124, 259).

By this time, many of the Blacks leaving the South resettled in urban areas. More often than not, they found segregation in housing and discrimination in employment. Segregation and discrimination, although usually less blatant than in the large cities of the North and the Midwest, were integral in the social framework of Southern California.

Even in a new city such as Los Angeles, characterized by mobility and a suburban pattern of life, the efforts of Negroes to move from their area of original settlement to developments along the ocean or into surrounding communities were thwarted by local governments and by organized private groups, chiefly through restrictive covenants that forbade the sale of properties to Negroes (Glaab and Brown 1976:260).

Black Colonies

Planned Black communities were first organized in the 1820s in the Midwest and Canada as refuges for escaped or manumitted slaves. In later, more carefully planned pre-Civil War settlements, members stressed mutual aid, education, vocational training, and preparation for independent citizenship (Landon 1936:304-312; Pease and Pease 1963).

After Emancipation, Black towns were founded in the South and the East. During the western migration, seven Black colonies were founded in Kansas and "were doing reasonably well" by 1879 (Painter 1977:149-153). In the Oklahoma-Indian Territories, 25 Black towns were settled between 1890 and 1910. These followed the establishment in 1869 of three communities of freedmen from the Creek Nation (Hawkins 1973:141; Knight 1977:110, 116).

By 1908, when the Allensworth Colony was founded, however, the issue of integration versus separatism was of major concern in the Black community. W. E. B. DuBois, whose group established the NAACP, demanded full citizenship and equal rights for Blacks within mainstream American society. Booker T. Washington advocated Black self-help, from the basis of separate communities. Col. Allensworth's philosophy, expressed not only in the founding of the colony but in all of his commentary on Blacks in America, agreed with that of Washington.

The town of Allensworth, in common with most agrarian settlements promoted in the West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, offered ownership of land, a community base, and a chance for profitable agriculture. Col. Allensworth and the other founders of the town, however, emphasized, not only the organization of a separatist colony, but the availability of civil liberties, including self-government, of education, and of the chance to develop "into the highest degree of citizenship and manhood" (The Sentiment Maker, May 15, 1912:3). These goals -- refuge, self-determination, education, preparation for citizenship -- had been expressed throughout the history of planned American Black communities.

THE TOWN OF ALLENSWORTH

Home Sweet Home

Attention!!

To my comrades in arms, in the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry, and the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantry:

Somewhere, sometime, your dream has been to have a home, classic, beautiful, with perfect congenial environment but which will be self-sustaining, and while self-sustaining, may enable you to be independent, to follow the outdoor bent which your profession has made most desirable and with it to give the schooling, the physical upbringing which only home and flowers and fruit, framed in perfect peace, can give.

.....

You will be on the main line of the great Santa Fe Railway System within easy reach of San Francisco and Los Angeles ...you raise your own vegetables, pick your apples, cherries, pears, or such fruit as you care to raise, your own chickens, etc.

.....

It is here that we can see ourselves as we are. It is here that we are not overshadowed by the presence of beautiful white women and handsome white men, in such overwhelming numbers that we see no beauty in ourselves. It is here that we can see the pictures of our own upon the walls and faces upon the streets (The Sentiment Maker, May 15, 1912: 1, 2, 6).

On August 5, 1908, the Pacific Farming Company, land developers, filed a subdivision map for the tract of the California Colony and Home Promoting Association. The tract included 3,000 acres of land, water available from wells, and an established railway and shipping center, then called Solita (Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway Company 1905; Delano Record, August 8, 1908:2). Although the land was arid and an adequate water system not yet developed, Col. Allensworth and the other members of the Association apparently welcomed the Pacific Farming Company's venture. It is possible that other acreage was not readily available to them (cf. The Sentiment Maker, May 15, 1912:2).

Land sales were promoted by Pacific Farming and by the Association. Col. Allensworth lectured, wrote for the press, and urged (as in the promotional circular, The Sentiment Maker, quoted above) that soldiers retiring from all-Black units settle in the colony. Both town lots (from 45 to 50 feet wide, 110 to 150 feet deep) and rural acreage were available. Townsites ranged from \$150 to \$200. Lots in the business area, immediately west of the Santa Fe depot, were as high as \$300 to \$400. Rural land went for \$110 an acre, including \$10 for water development. Land could be bought on monthly payments, with as little as \$5 down and \$5 a month for city lots, and \$2 down - \$2 a month for rural acreage (The Sentiment Maker, May 15, 1912:4; Ramsey 1978: 55-56; cf. Tulare County Book of Deeds, Vol. 201, p. 311, and Vol. 236, p. 25).

Eight families were reported to have settled in Allensworth in the spring of 1909 (Tulare County Times, July 29, 1909). By January of 1911, Col. Allensworth noted about 80 residents in the colony (New York Age, January 19, 1911). At the end of 1913, the estimated population was 160 (Oakland Sunshine, Dec. 27, 1913:2). The maximum population of the town may have been 200, around 1914 (Ramsey 1978:101).

The colonists, although few, moved rapidly toward the community organization which Col. Allensworth had envisioned. School sessions, kindergarten through eleventh grade, with William Payne as teacher, began in fall 1910 in a private house. The Allensworth School District was created in February 1912, bonds voted in June of that year for a school building, and the schoolhouse completed in December. A branch of the Tulare County Free Library was dedicated on July 4, 1913, largely through the efforts of Mrs. Allensworth and on land donated by her (Tulare County Historical Library).

The residents of Allensworth applied for the establishment of their own election precinct, which was also created in February 1912. In the presidential election that year, 32 of Allensworth's townspeople voted, all for the straight Republican ticket. Joshua Singleton, of Singleton's store, served as a delegate to the county Republican Convention.

The first business in Allensworth opened in 1909. Mary Jane Bickers operated a small grocery store and cafe, along with a post office, out of her front room. She was the first postmistress of the town, which became a postal district in 1909 (Ramsey 1978:159, 165).

John and Clara Morris began operation of the Allensworth Hotel around 1910; Zebedee Hindsman established the first general store in 1911. By 1913, the town also included Singleton's store, the Carter Livery Stable, Milner's Barber Shop, the Scott-Gross Drugstore, and Johnson's Bakery (Mason-Tillman 1983 I:28-30; Oakland Sunshine, Dec. 27, 1913:2).

Daily life in Allensworth at this time, as the settlers and their children recall, was mainly that of nineteenth-century rural America. Homes, businesses, and public buildings were lit with kerosene lamps and heated with wood or coal stoves. Laundry was boiled in tin tubs over backyard fires. Horses pulled buggies and farm equipment.

John Morris, the hotel manager, however, operated a machine shop at his place, for the repair of irrigation equipment from nearby ranches. His friend, Joe Durel, who lived in Allensworth from around 1912 to 1920, recalled having for awhile the only truck in town.

Joe Durel also remarked that "we were all farmers;" he grew "wheat, barley, and a few vegetables." By 1913, grain and alfalfa had been planted in the rural areas around Allensworth, and there were several hundred dairy cattle (The Sentiment Maker, May 15, 1912:4). Almost all of the residents in town had vegetable gardens; many kept chickens and pigs, as well as a cow or two, or a horse. The typical Allensworth lot was, in Leslie Stewart-Abernathy's (1986) phrase, an urban farmstead.

Living on the land at Allensworth was not easy, even in the town's brief flourishing. Henry Singleton commented that the soil was so alkali-packed that "it looked just like flour." Pauline Hall Patton recalled winds that were "strong enough to make you fly." Marjorie Towns Patterson had vivid memories of alkali grass and mirages in the summer heat. Scorching summers and the lack of trees were described by many of the settlers.

Henry Singleton felt that the growth of the colony was due, as Col. Allensworth had hoped, to "a great, great unity among us people." Both Josephine Hackett and Armilda Archer Smith recalled, for example, that their families were able to use portions of their neighbors' land for gardens and pasturage. Joe Durel said, "But we got along very well...then he'd come and help me and next time he needed help I'd go over and help him, and that's how we got along...that's what made the community stay alive for a long time, until the wells began to get dry."

Soon after Allensworth was founded, it became evident that the apparently abundant water table was lowering, and that a more developed supply would be necessary. Increasing agriculture in the San Joaquin Valley had diverted much of the mountain runoff, the major water source. The Alpaugh colony, ca. 6 miles northwest of Allensworth, had experienced drought soon after its inception in 1906, and had installed a 12-mile ditch south to wells at Smyrna. By 1915, the community had organized the Alpaugh Irrigation District, to improve the ditch and drill more wells (Delano Record, Oct. 3, 1908:4; Adams 1916:88-90).

The Allensworth City Water Company, incorporated under the direction of Pacific Farming on December 5, 1908, was to provide a water system for the colony. "Within the first two years, the developer built what was in effect the town's water system: three artesian wells, a series of irrigation ditches, a canal, and two reservoirs" (Ramsey 1978:58).

Despite pressure from the residents of Allensworth, the water company's improvements consisted only of the addition of gasoline-powered pumps for the wells, in 1910, and the boring of a deeper well in late 1911. The water system was turned over to the colony in 1913. Necessary development of the system was beyond the means of the settlers, and water grew increasingly scarce.

Allensworth suffered two more serious reversals in 1914. One was an apparently innocuous change in the Santa Fe Railroad line, when a spur was completed to Alpaugh in July (Weekly Tulare Register, July 2, 1914). The Santa Fe depot at Allensworth was a shipping center for the area's grain and some livestock, with a large warehouse, a corral, and a Wells Fargo Express office (Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe 1905). The station provided Allensworth with jobs and trade. In 1913, the monthly volume of shipping at Allensworth was estimated at ca. \$4,000 (Oakland Sunshine, Dec. 27, 1913). Situated closer to the large grain fields, the Alpaugh spur became the local shipping center. In 1929, when Santa Fe closed the Allensworth station, the highest monthly shipment for the previous year had been \$14.02 (California Public Utilities Commission 1929).

In September 1914, Col. Allensworth died from injuries received in an accident. The concluding resolution of those adopted in a meeting of the people of Allensworth was:

Finally we pledge to live up to the ideals that were Colonel Allensworth's. We re-affirm our faith in the community he founded, we reconsecrate ourselves to the task that was his and ours, and rededicate ourselves to the unfinished work and will strive to make this community a glowing monument to his sacred memory and one that shall live throughout the ages (The Colored Citizen, September 26, 1914:3).

The people of Allensworth made every effort to live up to their resolution. But with drying wells and a failing economy, the settlers, as Joe Durel said, "began to get discouraged and move." Some stayed on, like Zebedee Hindsman, who had started the town's first general store in 1911, and who lived in Allensworth until his death in 1950. Some kept their places; many sold. Although Allensworth was occupied into the 1970s, and was home for many beyond the original townspeople, the town retains its strongest image as Col. Allensworth's dream.

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file at the Office of Interpretive Services, California
Department of Parks and Recreation, Sacramento. Those
cited were:

Joe Durel
Josephine Hackett
Pauline Hall Patton
Marjorie Towns Patterson
Henry Singleton
Armilda Archer Smith

The Establishment of the First Baptist Church
at Allensworth

1908-1913: As settlers moved into Allensworth, they established congregations of their chosen faith, holding services in homes or at the school. The Oakland Sunshine reported on December 27, 1913: "There are two organized churches, the First Baptist and the A. M. E. Zion. The Sunday school at present is a union school. Services are conducted every Sunday and weekly prayer services are had." Local pastors of both faiths came to preach at Allensworth. A third congregation, the Seventh Day Adventist, was also established early in the town's history.

1914: August 29--This lot (Block 46, Lot 1) was deeded to the Northern California Baptist Convention.

September 16--The citizens of Allensworth, stunned by the death of Col. Allensworth the previous day, resolved that "We reaffirm our faith in the community he founded, we reconsecrate ourselves to the task that was his and ours, and rededicate ourselves to the unfinished work..." Chairman of the citizens' group was Oscar Overr.

November 10-14--Oscar Overr and Nimrod Rainbow were delegates from Allensworth to the annual meeting of the Northern California Baptist Convention, held at the First Baptist Church in Selma. Col. Allensworth was mourned as a pastor who died "in active service."

1915: Late in the year, construction was begun on the church, under the direction of Reverend J.L. Allen, a Missionary Pastor-at-Large from the Northern California Baptist Convention.

1916: March 19--the First Baptist Church at Allensworth was dedicated by Reverend Allen. Speakers at the ceremony included local pastors and the president and other dignitaries of the Northern California Baptist Convention.

1917: The church had not yet been assigned a pastor. Nimrod Rainbow served as clerk.

1918: Reverend Isaac Pearson was assigned to the Allensworth church, with Nimrod Rainbow continuing as clerk. Reverend Pearson served both the Allensworth congregation and another at Hanford.

1919: The pastor at Allensworth was Reverend Pearson, and the clerk Charlotte Rainbow. Noted as Sunday School Superintendent was Mrs. Zenobia Payne.